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ABSTRACT

The five plays most frequently produced in high schools--"Our Town," "Harvey," "Arsenic and Old Lace," "You Can't Take It with You," and "The Curious Savage"--perpetuate an image of women that is no longer tolerated in most educational materials. An analysis of these plays shows that they include many more male than female roles and that female characters tend to fall into two familiar stereotypes: woman as nurturer (homemaker, nurse, caretaker of men and children) and woman as lovable, ridiculous eccentric whose ideas are not to be taken seriously. Not one of the five plays includes an example of a competent, decisive woman who solves problems and meets challenges independently. There are good reasons for continuing to produce these plays: they are important examples of American dramatic literature, and they are popular with audiences and actors. Teachers can mitigate the effects of their negative images of women through two strategies: (1) they can use the plays as teaching devices for examination of attitudes toward women and of the changing role of women, and (2) they can balance the production schedule with plays offering a more positive or contemporary image of women. (The paper lists criteria for choosing plays that portray women positively, and it discusses a number of plays that meet the criteria.) (GT)

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SEX-ROLE STEREOTYPES IN SECONDARY SCHOOL THEATRE

Sara Nalley

The effects of the burgeoning women's movement were felt in both theatre and education during the 1970's. Educators, recognizing the existence of sex-role stereotypes in materials and activities, banished Dick, Jane, and Baby Sally from elementary reading programs, made classes in shop and cooking co-educational, and appropriated funds for girls' athletics.

The response of the theatre was more specialized. Feminist theatre groups, seeking to provide opportunities in theatre for women and to advance the cause of feminism, appeared throughout the country.[1] By the end of the 1970's, the literature of the field was beginning to reflect an interest in women in theatre, particularly women playwrights.

Yet through this tumultuous decade secondary school theatre programs were largely unresponsive to the calls, from education on the one hand and theatre on the other, for an end to sex-role stereotypes. On high school stages across America, Mrs. Gibbs and Mrs. Webb still string beans, Veta Simmons still conspires to have Elwood P. Dowd and his rabbit friend put away, and Aunt Abby and Aunt Martha still lace their elderberry wine with arsenic. The production survey of Thespian troupes, published yearly in Dramatics, shows that these three plays, Our Town, Harvey, and Arsenic and Old Lace, along with You Can't Take It with You and The Curious Savage, were produced more frequently in the responding high schools during 1978-1979 than any other full-length, non-musical plays. In fact, these five plays appeared high on the production survey in every year of the 1970's.[2]

Large numbers of adolescents perform in these plays year after year, and even larger numbers of students see them performed. It seems appropriate, then, that teachers and directors take a fresh look at these familiar scripts from a previously neglected point of view, that of their image of women. What do these plays say about women and their relation to society?

The answer is predictable, since the most recent of the five plays is now thirty years old. You Can't Take It with You was first produced in 1936, Our Town in 1938, Arsenic and Old Lace in 1941, Harvey in 1944, and The Curious Savage in 1950. It is virtually inevitable that these plays depict women in stereotyped ways, perpetuating an image of women rarely questioned thirty years ago but no longer acceptable in most educational materials.

The most obvious measure of the relative importance of men and women in the plays is the number of roles for males and females. Since it is not unusual for high school drama groups to be predominantly female, and since one criterion for play selection is presumably the availability of roles for interested students, one might expect that these most popular plays would reflect at least a somewhat equal balance between male and female roles. Not so; the five plays require a total of 51 males and 29 females. Even at audition time, the message is clear: in theatre, as in many other school activities, males are more in demand.

More subtle but equally clear is the message conveyed by the activities and personalities of the women characters in the five plays. While several of the plays feature women in central

roles, these characters tend to fall into two familiar stereotypes: woman as nurturer (homemaker, nurse, caretaker of men and children), and woman as lovable eccentric. The women in supporting or minor roles are sometimes equally unstable; if they are "normal," they are inevitably nurses, wives, or girl friends, defined only through their relationships to men. The five plays include not one example of a competent, decisive woman, solving problems and meeting challenges independently. In these plays, performed in American high schools hundreds of times each year, woman's place is in the home, and she is allowed to escape the kitchen only if she is a kook--a charming kook, perhaps, but certainly not a person to be taken seriously.

The image of woman as nurturer is most evident in Our Town. "This is the way we were . . . at the beginning of the twentieth century," intones the Stage Manager, Thornton Wilder's male voice of wisdom and truth. The way we were in Grover's Corners, New Hampshire, was distinctly male-oriented. The men are editors, doctors, professors who make the decisions; the women are wives and mothers who make breakfast and comfort children. Their only hope for realizing their own dreams is through manipulating their husbands: Mrs. Webb confides that she got to see the Atlantic Ocean by "droppin' hints from time to time," and Mrs. Gibbs tries the same tactic in her campaign to go to Paris. In the world of the play, these passive roles are unquestioned, even applauded. The Stage Manager, whose views are presented as timeless and universal, observes that both women "cooked three meals a day--one of 'em for twenty years, the other for forty--. . . washed,

cleaned the house,--and never a nervous breakdown." This feat, high school students are told, qualifies the women as lovers of life.

Nor is there any indication that Emily will resist her subsidiary role. Already, George is class president while she is secretary. "I don't have to tell you how important that is," the Stage Manager comments, presumably without irony. George, graduating from high school, has choices to make: will he go to college or begin his career? Emily, though she is "one of the brightest girls ever graduated from High School," has no such decisions; the only role open to her is that of wife and mother.

Of the many supporting roles in Our Town, only one of any lengt. is given to a woman, Mrs. Soames. She is a caricature of the talkative, ridiculous woman, full of gossip and clichés. Her portrayal is a comic convention; the fact that audiences accept it as valid is an indication of how deeply ingrained are the stereotypes.

Three of the remaining four plays depict women as charming eccentrics, a characterization so common that it, too, has become a comic convention. Of these, You Can't Take It with You presents, on the surface, the least negative view. The women of the Sycamore household are happily engaged in pursuing their own offbeat interests, and no one--least of all playwrights Kaufman and Hart--suggests that they should be mopping floors instead. The one woman character who has chosen a traditional wife-and-mother role, Mrs. Kirby, is portrayed as dull and unhappy.

On examination, though, this familiar comedy reveals a perspective on women firmly grounded in male-oriented tradition. The activities of the Sycamore women (like those of the men in the household) are amusing but meaningless; neither Penny's playwriting nor Essie's ballet is to be taken seriously. Furthermore, the ingenue Alice, the only Sycamore to have escaped "mild insanity," is given a comfortably conventional female role. She works as a secretary, spending her lunch hours shopping for clothes to impress the boss's son. Most revealing of all is her part in the play's resolution. Faced with a choice between the Kirbys' traditional lifestyle and that of her own family, Alice opts for tradition: "Oh, I wish I lived in a family that . . . behaved the way other people's families do. . . . Why can't we be like other people?" Alice does not change her mind independently; her male friend Tony decides to accept her family and orders her to stay. Alice responds by falling into his arms sighing, "Tony. . . oh, Tony!"--a thoroughly conventional resolution of the conflict.

The comic convention of the well-meaning but eccentric woman appears again in both Arsenic and Old Lace and The Curious Savage. Abby and Martha Brewster, in Arsenic, are stereotypical little old ladies, nursing their sick friends and mothering their nephew Mortimer. The play's comedy, as everyone knows, is derived from their habit of poisoning lonely old men to put them out of their misery. Here, again, the women are charming but ridiculous figures. The voice of reason is male, as nephew Mortimer steps in to deal with the problem.

Arsenic's male orientation is further illustrated in the characterization of Elaine, Mortimer's girl friend. She is written as an intelligent, resourceful young woman (playwright Joseph Kesselring says she "looks surprisingly smart for a minister's daughter"), yet her only interest seems to be marrying Mortimer. She apparently has no existence apart from him. This "surprisingly smart" young woman uses sexual teasing to manipulate Mortimer, who tells her, "You're a sweet girl. . . . But I have something on my mind now and I want you to go home and wait until I call you. . . . When we're married and I have problems to face I hope you're less tedious." It is a familiar message: the passive woman pleases her man.

Still another character straight from the Sycamore family tradition is Ethel Savage of John Patrick's The Curious Savage, again, a charming but somewhat offbeat woman. Her scheme to give away her late husband's money perplexes her family and lands her in a nursing home with five other pleasantly disturbed characters. Here, too, the minor characters representing the "sane" world offer evidence that the real world is dominated by men. The male doctor gives orders while the female nurse acts as nurturer of patients, receptionist, switchboard operator, and general flunky. When the nurse, Miss Willie (no last name) saves the day and the money at the end, it is revealed that her nursing career is motivated by her desire to care for her husband, who is one of the patients. Like Elaine in Arsenic, this woman exists only for her man. The male doctor, not incidentally, has a last name and is apparently not married to a patient.

The only one of the five plays to be written by a woman is Mary Chase's Harvey. Ironically, its women characters are the least sympathetic of all the plays. The lovable eccentric here is, of course, the male Elwood P. Dowd. But while the heroines of The Curious Savage and Arsenic are in the care of well-meaning, responsible characters, Elwood is managed by unpleasant, caricatured women. His sister, Veta, is a gossiping social climber, ashamed of her brother's peculiarities and eager to have him institutionalized so she can get on with the only activity that interests her, finding a husband for her equally unpleasant daughter. The complications in the scheme to get rid of Elwood arise chiefly from Veta's incompetence; at the sanitarium she is capable only of simpering and pleading with the handsome young doctor.

The doctors are male, the nurses female sex objects, a distinction which produces much of the play's humor. Of the nurse, Kelly, Dr. Sanderson exults, "Beautiful--and dumb, too. It's almost too good to be true." When she worries about mistaking Elwood for a patient, he gives her familiar advice: "He's a man, isn't he? . . . Go into your old routine--you know--the eyes--the swish--the works. . . . Keep him here, Kelly--if you have to do a strip tease."

Examples of sex-related clichés abound in Harvey. Women are called girl, baby, dame, and kid. Daughter Myrtle is "thrilled" when she hears that the sanitarium guard tore her mother's clothes off, "disappointed" when the story does not end in rape. Dr. Chumley confides his dream of cold beer and anonymous sex with

"a pretty young woman, a strange woman, a quiet woman. . . . I wouldn't even want to know her name." It is, in short, a play that derives much of its comedy from an image of women as unpleasant, manipulative creatures, useful only for sex.

Clearly, the five plays most frequently produced in high schools perpetuate an image of women that is no longer tolerated in most educational materials. Clearly, too, there are good reasons for continuing to produce these plays: they are important examples of American dramatic literature (three of them won the Pulitzer Prize), and they are popular with audiences and actors. What, then, are the implications of this analysis?

Two strategies may be helpful. First, when these plays are produced in the high school, they may be used as a teaching device for examination of attitudes toward women and discussion of the changing role of women. Second, the high school director can seek to balance the production schedule with plays offering a more positive and/or contemporary image of women.

The first strategy is predicated on the idea that the stereotypes prevalent in these plays are inappropriate in an educational setting only if they are presented as acceptable. If students, both participants and audience, are encouraged to see the plays as representing outdated attitudes, their presentation may serve to stimulate awareness of women's issues. Certainly no one would suggest that Hamlet be eliminated from the curriculum because it depicts women as passive. But Hamlet is far removed from the students' world and is thus recognized as representative of another culture. The characters and attitudes in the five

plays studied are much closer to the students' own experience--indeed, they differ little from the situation comedies appearing nightly on television--and thus are much more likely to be seen as valid. The concerned educator need not reject the plays, but rather should recognize their potential for shaping attitudes. Teachers and directors can encourage discussion of questions about the role of women in the play: What was expected of women in this time? Do they have the same interests and activities as men? What choices are available to them? Do the women characters in this play reflect the way women really were at this time? The way they are today? How might a modern woman react to the attitudes and situations in the play?

Such an analysis might lead, for example, to a revealing classroom or post-rehearsal discussion of the drugstore scene in Our Town. As these two young people plan their future, does the discussion center on George's dream or Emily's? What is her role in the conversation? If the scene were taking place today, would her choices be different? More difficult? Many of the ideas expressed in Our Town are presented as timeless. Do any of the play's assumptions about women fit this category?

Concerned educators have long used such methods in teaching literature. Extending them to the theatre program should present few difficulties.

The second strategy, that of seeking to include in the production schedule plays offering strong roles for women and portraying women in non-stereotyped ways, is suggested with the knowledge that play selection in the secondary school is a

difficult and complex process, and that the presentation of a positive view of women is only one of many criteria that must be considered. Nevertheless, the issue is important; it is worth consideration by high school directors. Surely it is not unreasonable to suggest that directors seek scripts which offer positive answers to some of these questions:

1. Are females represented in the script in proportion to their representation in the population? Are there strong acting roles for women?

2. Are some women shown as independent, self-sufficient persons, as opposed to being someone's wife or girl friend? Are women portrayed as healthy, intelligent persons? Are they shown solving problems, meeting challenges?

3. Are some women shown successfully pursuing nontraditional roles? Are these women treated seriously rather than as objects of ridicule?

4. Do male and female characters avoid the use of denigrating language in speaking to or about women?

One need not look to the feminist theatre alone for plays meeting some or all of these criteria. Indeed, two such plays appear on the Thespian production survey for 1978-1979, though they were presented less frequently than the five plays studied. In The Miracle Worker, William Gibson depicts Annie Sullivan as a woman of strength and determination who succeeds against difficult odds, including the anti-female bias of her employer, Captain Keller. The Diary of Anne Frank by Frances Goodrich and Albert Hackett is a moving portrayal of a spirited, courageous adolescent. Both plays offer positive role models for adolescent women.

Among other plays which treat the complexities of adolescence in a sensitive manner are Carson McCullers's The Member of the Wedding, which deals as well with the problems of a black woman

in the South in 1945; Paul Zindel's The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds, which counterpoints the problems and promise of adolescence against the despair of middle and old age; and even Little Women, which, despite its sentimentality, is a story of women coping alone and which has, in Jo, an intelligent, non-stereotyped adolescent heroine.

Realistic treatments of the problems of women of different generations can lead to a deeper understanding of feminist issues. Ladyhouse Blues, a recent off-Broadway play by Kevin O'Morrison, concerns a fiercely independent woman and her four daughters. An aging woman's struggle to maintain her independence is pitted against her daughter's concern in Paddy Chayefsky's television play, The Mother. Lorraine Hansberry deals thoughtfully with the dreams of three black women in A Raisin in the Sun.

Other plays treating the problems of black women include Charlie L. Russell's comedy Five on the Black Hand Side, in which a middle-aged woman suddenly rebels against her authoritarian husband; Alice Childress's Wine in the Wilderness, which examines black female stereotypes; Elaine Jackson's Toe Jam, contrasting the goals of a mother and her two young daughters; and Ntozake Shange's dance/poem For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide/ When the Rainbow is Enuf. Language or subject matter may make the latter three plays unsuitable for high schools in conservative areas.

Schools whose theatre programs are not restricted to the non-controversial might consider Megan Terry's Calm Down Mother and Approaching Simone or Tom Eyen's Sarah B. Divine!, described by its author as "a musical biographical fantasy on the life of

Sarah Bernhardt." All three plays provide strong roles for women in nontraditional dramatic forms.

For schools advanced enough or courageous enough to produce classics, the possibilities are even wider: Greek drama offers Antigone, Medea, and The Trojan Women; Shakespeare drew Juliet as a strong young woman; and Ibsen's A Doll's House offers evidence that feminism is not a twentieth-century phenomenon.

Finally, the director seeking to confront women's issues in forms not requiring full-scale production might examine three scripts suited to reader's theatre or platform staging: To Be Young, Gifted, and Black, Robert Nemiroff's adaptation of Lorraine Hansberry's life story; Out of Our Father's House, adapted by Eve Merriam, Paula Wagner, and Jack Hoffsiss from Merriam's anthology Growing Up Female in America; and A Voice of My Own, a script developed by Elinor Jones which chronicles the struggles of women writers.

These suggestions are limited to scripts readily available in anthologies or through drama publishers, and the list is necessarily incomplete and subjective; any director can easily add personal favorites. And, the suggestions are offered with the warning that most of these plays will be less popular with students and audiences than Harvey or You Can't Take It with You.

It is important, nevertheless, that high school directors recognize and confront the predominance of sex-role stereotypes on the high school stage. In The Curious Savage, one of the women admonishes her fellow patient, "Climbing on chairs is

women's work. Men have mountains." Adolescent heroines have been climbing on too many chairs for too many years. They deserve mountains, as well.

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NOTES

[1]Kenneth M. Cameron and Patti P. Gillespie. The Enjoyment of Theatre (New York: Macmillan, 1980), p. 119.

[2]See Dramatics, Oct. 1971, p. 26; Oct. 1972, p. 10; Oct. 1973, p. 16; Nov. 1975, p. 9; Sept./Oct. 1976, p. 9; Nov./Dec. 1977, p. 4; Nov./Dec. 1978, p. 17; and Nov./Dec. 1979, pp. 6-7. While the surveys do not purport to be scientific samplings, they do include more than 1000 schools each year and thus give a fair indication of the plays being performed in secondary schools.